

Issue Brief

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Cohort 2: Promoting local ownership and building capacities for conflict prevention

Preventing Violent Conflicts in Nigeria:

Challenges and Opportunities for Enhanced National Ownership

Takwa Zebulun Suifon

Introduction

Over the years, the Government of Nigeria, with the support of partners and stakeholders, has invested enormous resources in the prevention and management of violent conflicts in the country. Yet the causes and manifestation of destructive conflicts have persisted as Nigeria continues to witness violent conflicts, particularly relating to the following: the Boko Haram insurgency in North-East (already weakened but not completely defeated); the deadly farmers-nomadic pastoralists conflicts¹ predominantly in the North-Central parts (but also nationwide);² piracy, oil bunkering and pipeline vandalization by militants in the Delta; and, kidnapping for ransom in the southern parts of the country. The country is passing through a major humanitarian crisis that has resulted in more than 5 million displaced by the insurgency in the North-East since 2009.

Interventions towards peace, security and stability have remained highly militarized, and coordination mechanisms have remained weak and largely unsustainable. The current tension (as of mid-2017) in the country as a result of the anxiety and uncertainty over President Muhammadu Buahari's health has implications for the country's stability.³ The pump and pageantry with which he was received upon his return Saturday August 19, 2017, with thousands of jubilant youths lined along the 40 km stretch from the airport to the Presidential Villa, is in contrast with protests by some activist

groups who were already demanding his immediate return from London or resignation.

While the United Nation's (UN) resolve to maintain international peace and security remains sacrosanct more than 70 years after its creation, the responsibility to ensure peace still resides with national governments. National opinion in Nigeria, inadequately informed of the UN's mandate, has most often been critical and hostile, blaming the world body for inaction, indifference or inactivity in response to violent conflicts.

In light of the above, there is growing realization that something must be done differently to effectively address Nigeria's current threats to peace and security, in the context of UN Secretary-General (UNSG) Antonio Guterres' push for prevention. How can the UN leverage its influence and strategically support Nigeria in addressing current threats to peace and stability, considering the country's specificities? This paper looks at the prevailing situation in Nigeria and argues that current challenges, if tactfully handled, can be transformed into opportunities to enhance existing capacities and mechanisms for peacebuilding and prevention of violent conflicts.⁴

The UNSG's emphasis on a proactive approach to conflict prevention and sustaining peace is particularly relevant to a country like Nigeria. In addition, the current discussion on how to enhance roles of UN Resident Coordinators (RCs) to actualize this renewed vision is timely and Nigeria may provide a good test of the drive towards a paradigm shift. This Issues Brief serves as a contribution to that discussion.

1 Many Nigerian scholars/academics have written on this age long crisis that has hitherto not been vastly discussed as now. Some of these authors include: Okechukwu Edward Okeke, 'Conflicts between Fulani Herders and Farmers in Central and Southern Nigeria: Discourse on Proposed Establishment of Grazing Routes and Reserves' (January 2014); Ofuoku A. U and Isife B.I., 'Causes, effects and resolution of framers-nomadic cattle herders conflict in Delta state, Nigeria' (June 2009); Didam Audu Sunday, 'Conflicts among Farmers and Pastoralists in Northern Nigeria Induced by Freshwater Scarcity' (2013). Mercy Corps report in July 2015 (published recently), 'The Economic Costs of Conflict: Evidence on violence, livelihoods, and resilience in Nigeria's Middle Belt' also allude to this critical issue.

2 The Global Terrorist Index (2015) ranks the sporadic attacks by the predominantly Fulani herdsmen in Nigeria as one of the deadliest terrorist groups alongside Boko Haram, ISIS, Taliban and Al Shabaab.

3 At the time of first writing this Brief, the President was on a medical trip to the UK (since late 2016) during which time there had been talk of possible coup d'etats.

4 The new Resident Coordinator on resumption of duties since November 2016 has stated, in his vision for Nigeria, the need for a holistic approach to addressing conflicts in the various geopolitical zones of the country, urging UNCT to see multiple conflicts as opportunities for effective redress of lingering conflicts.

Nigeria at a Glance

Nigeria's strategic importance in Africa and its huge economic and population resource base remains 'potential' due to the myriad of conflicts which have significantly stalled the country's overall human development, democratic consolidation, and peace and stability. With over 180 million inhabitants, Nigeria operates a federal system of government with 36 states, a federal capital territory and a further subdivision into 774 local government areas (LGAs). The country's plural and diverse ethnic, religious, linguistic (more than 300 ethnic groups are distributed across the various states of the federation) and regional fault lines have been exploited to perpetuate violence for political reasons.

Conflicts in Nigeria generally fall into three broad categories: identity-based, resource-based and political power-based conflicts. The multiple communal conflicts, which have resulted from the manipulation of ethnic and religious identities (including violent extremism), as well as those fueled by the settler-indigene claims over authentic citizenry, fall under the identity-based category of conflicts. Conflicts over competition for resources such as land amongst farmers and pastoralists or grazers, as well as struggles for control of natural resources such as petroleum in the Niger Delta region, are considered resource-based conflicts. Violent conflicts orchestrated by political dynamics such as elections and the struggle for power at both national and local levels typify power-based conflicts.

These categories are not exhaustive, given some conflicts assume complex proportions with a mix of all the aforementioned elements. Categorization of conflicts is further compounded by rising crime levels and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, as well as socio-economic factors such as massive youth unemployment and poverty in the country. The causes of these conflicts are structural, and rooted in history, governance, and socio-ethnic differences. The manifestations also assume various forms and levels of violence.

Sustaining Peace Through National Ownership

Nigeria is unlike typical post-conflict contexts where the liberal peace approach was highly influenced by international involvement in reconstruction and peacebuilding processes (such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Cote d'Ivoire). Nigeria is considered a middle-income economy and the country's sense of national pride reflects its perception of itself as the 'big brother' of West Africa. Typically, prescriptive approaches to addressing Nigeria's current dilemmas are resisted, as these are often interpreted as attempts to impose foreign values of influence on what are considered internal matters.⁵ Through the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) III, the UN has been working with the Nigerian Government in a number of areas. One area of support has been in establishing a functional national

infrastructure for peace, as well as supporting other peace initiatives. These include the numerous dialogue initiatives in the Niger Delta by past and current administration, inter-religious dialogue led by the Nigeria Inter-religious Council (NIREC) comprising the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) and the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (SCIA), and town hall meetings organized by the Government on the protracted farmers-herders conflict across various parts of Nigeria. Capacity building, trainings, advocacy and support for interventions such as mediation and establishment of community structures for peace, constitute aspects of the UN's support package.

The prevalence of violent conflicts raises a number of pertinent issues. First, whether the issues of ownership, appropriation, and internalization of peace have been adequately addressed or understood by the Nigerian stakeholders, the UN and other development partners. Second, it raises concern as to how stakeholders, especially beneficiaries, perceive ownership of conflict prevention and peacebuilding programming with regards to their conceptualization, processes, implementation, accountability, and monitoring and evaluation.

While most conflict prevention and peacebuilding programmes are implemented through government implementing partners (IPs), with counterpart funding arrangements, there is a need to investigate what 'peacebuilding' means to various conflicting entities in Nigeria. Does 'peacebuilding' entail 'dismantling' some existing elitist arrangements to create new equilibria and what could be the political implications of this? The existence of systems where groups or portions of society dominate others, sometimes over decades or through century-long historical or cultural arrangements have perpetuated inequalities, marginalization and sometimes semi-caste systems⁶ in many parts of the country. Perhaps it is time to take advantage of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that seem to have unprecedented buy-in from governments across the globe and articulate a common message about the 17 pillars that constitute the building blocks for peace. This development approach to peacebuilding could enhance understanding between the marginalized communities and the dominant groups; between various regions of Nigeria; and between the governing elites and the governed masses in the spirit of a much needed 'new social contract'.

In his interaction with national stakeholders, the current UNRC in Nigeria has consistently maintained that the UN is a dependable partner to mobilize expected resources from, even though it is not a funding agency (this has helped clarify local expectations). There are enormous opportunities for mobilizing internal resources (financial and technical) for both development and peacebuilding in Nigeria.

⁵ Kristoffer Liden, 'Building Peace between Global and Local Politics: The Cosmopolitical Ethics of Liberal Peacebuilding', *International Peacekeeping* 16, no. 5 (2009), 626.

⁶ In the North-East part of the country, the Boko Haram insurgency has exposed a lingering case of a 'Caste System' within communities that cannot be ignored in the quest to bring lasting solutions to the crisis.

However, caution must be taken when romanticizing the contributions of local dimensions of the notion of ownership and/or leadership, because they can reinforce positions of powerholders (mostly elites and cabals) who often exclude women, youths and minorities.⁷

Building resilience has also been part of the strategy supported by UNDP. While promoting Nigeria's coping mechanisms, efforts linked to the resilience approach should be fully understood by all. These should extend beyond short-term interventions, by adopting a conflict transformation process and approach which links to development as a long term goal. These interventions should not end up sustaining or perpetuating a status quo that promotes inequalities and exclusion. At times, when the UN and the international community has evaded prying into sensitive terrain or issues, it has inadvertently missed opportunities to redress deep-rooted inequalities and societal imbalances. Empowering RCs in non-UN mission settings like Nigeria to navigate such tricky issues may be a great step forward in actualizing the UN's (violent conflict) preventive mandate.

With the help of the PDAs, there exists a need for constant analytical perspectives on the issue of resilience, weighing conflict-carrying capacities and peace-generating factors to ensure the promotion of positive rather than negative peace. In Nigeria, the dichotomy between the Federal Government and State Governments, and between the State Government and LGAs – some of who suffer from legitimacy concerns as they are handpicked by the State – should also be considered in these engagements. The current debate on restructuring Nigeria, which means different things to the many people calling for it, could be a conversation the UN takes a more active role in.

Decades of peacebuilding experience in Africa have revealed that, despite the rhetoric, financial funding to peacebuilding has generally been very poor, with a bias towards a militarized approach. Nigeria is no exception. Despite the huge threats posed by violent conflicts, efforts at building capacities for conflict prevention and peacebuilding have been lacklustre, ad hoc and starved of reliable funding. Beyond funding and capacities, there exists a need for political will, particularly from the government and leadership at all levels. Perhaps the 'mixed dish' can be applied as a metaphor to understanding the complex conflicts in Nigeria.⁸ Addressing these should entail a degree of national ownership and drive. At the same time initiatives should embrace partner support programmes, in the spirit of partnership as articulated under SDG 17, and also avoid the perception of hegemonic tendencies.⁹ It is a task that requires more tact, constant analysis of the evolving context and a balanced mix of concepts, strategies and processes.

There is no denying that the PDAs, as tools in the hands of RCs, need to be repositioned and strengthened in order to play a critical role in determining the required mix of practical interventions needed to address the multiple conflicts and threats to peace and security in the country. Accentuating preventive diplomacy will ensure more proactive RCs (and perhaps the DPA) in countries constantly under threat of conflict/crisis like Nigeria, where UN agencies do not usually see it as their 'mandate' to intervene. In the new potential framework, it would be useful to investigate further questions of national ownership by dissecting the role of elites, intellectuals and mainstream citizens in the collective ownership of their peace and development agenda.

Challenges and Opportunities

A practical reality worth mentioning is the complexity of navigating the complex and delicate political paths to building peace in Nigeria, including the sensitivities and ethnic cleavages often deliberately promoted and maneuvered by politicians in order to maintain imbalances. Peace and conflict issues are often embroiled within local and national politics.

Recent literature and discourse on peacebuilding also equates ownership to the concept of leadership and by implication political governance.¹⁰

The current health of political parties in Nigeria is worrisome with internal party squabbles and conflicts attributed to a lack of internal democracy and discipline. Winning elections or 'capturing power', as often expressed by politicians in Nigeria, and the lucrative nature of public office becomes an end and not a means to addressing the poverty and insecurity/violent conflict challenges faced by the nation. This is an area that needs capacity support but only fits well within election-related support packages. The damage the crisis is doing to political parties may be irreparable come the 2019 general elections.

UN and development partners' funding portfolio for peacebuilding has been insignificant compared to the magnitude of the challenge in Nigeria. For the UNRC to play a leading role, there is a need for predictable funding. Any increasing focus on prevention will necessitate a commensurate means to leverage that responsibility. A basket of funding for peace from donor agencies may be the likely way forward and contributions from Nigeria's private sector would boost the ownership drive.

The SDGs provide an opportunity for Nigeria, perhaps more than any other country to draw lessons from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Amina J. Mohammed, a former Minister in Nigeria before joining the UN in early 2017, is the current UN Deputy Secretary-General and a major actor in the formulation of the SDGs. The SDGs when considered as building blocks for peace (holistic peace), and particularly

7 Roger Mac Ginty, *International Peacebuilding and Local Resilience: Hybrid Forms of Peace* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 51.

8 Nigeria is famous for its very spicy pepper-soup often made of mix of assorted meats, herbs, vegetables and spices, and served hot.

9 Liden, 'Peace, Self-Governance and International Engagement', 11-12.

10 Sara Helmuller and Martina Santischi (eds) *Is Local Beautiful?: Peacebuilding between International Interventions and Locally Led Initiatives* (Springer, 2014).

SDG16 on creating peaceful, just and inclusive societies, provide a new platform to address the structural dimensions of conflicts. Federal and State structures in Nigeria are embracing the 2030 agenda as evidenced in the multiple demands for the UN to provide technical support to mainstream SDGs in their work (at all tiers of government). This represents an opportunity for the UN to deepen its engagement with Nigeria.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Partnership Framework (UNSDPF IV 2018-2022) signed on 27 July, 2017, between the UN and the Government of Nigeria places significant emphasis on peace and security. The new nomenclature and orientation constitutes an opportunity to further enhance the dimension of national ownership in articulating the various areas of programming and interventions in Nigeria. Following the Common Country Analyses (CCA), and the need to deepen work in peace and development, the opportunity to emphasize national ownership, leadership and patronage of Nigeria's own agenda cannot be overstated. In the context of UNDAF III, the UNDP-led programme, just as in previous efforts, laid the ground for 'credible, independent, inclusive national platform[s] established to support dialogue at national and sub-national levels...', with the aim of laying the foundation for the establishment of a functional peace architecture in Nigeria.¹¹

Having viable and sustainable structures and mechanisms is one of the key objectives of the partnership agreement between the UN and the Government of Nigeria. Given the success recorded by the National Peace Committee (NPC) for the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria (that was technically and financially supported by UNDP) in contributing to the strengthening of Nigeria's Peacebuilding architecture, adopting an integrated, inclusive and comprehensive approach to peacebuilding has since been promoted. In addition, support towards a bill to legislate peace, reconciliation and mediation is currently underway. The NPC recorded challenges relating to technical coordination of its initiatives, weak

Innovative public-private sector partnerships for peace may also be explored in Nigeria. Early indications are that the private sector is willing to venture into this direction. Nigeria's leading role in Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and African Union efforts at peace and security can be leveraged in its renewed quest to build and sustain peace.

Conclusion

It is evident that Nigeria has significant resources of its own both in terms of economic wealth as well as traditional skills for the management of conflicts. Capacities and local and national expertise abound.

Establishing viable structures and mechanisms that would allow Nigeria to move from ad hoc interventions on specific, short-term issues towards a viable and sustainable peace infrastructure that can operate at the federal, state and local level remains an imperative. These structures could help guarantee effective early warning and response systems through establishment of credible platforms for political dialogue at all levels to not only enhance ownership but build resilience and sustain peace. For these approaches to succeed, a shared vision (i.e. national ownership, international/UN responsibilities) and appropriate partnerships will be critical.

In addition, the UN may consider making Nigeria an exceptional case. The DPA-UNDP Joint Programme could consider increasing the collaboration by firstly enhancing the PDA's capacities (by adding to the existing Peace and Development Specialist). In addition, the human resources 'political mandate' of the RC could be expanded to adequately address challenges that require more proactive, political responses, in line with the UNSG's vision on conflict prevention and sustaining peace. A new Nigerian narrative should not be about conflicts alone. Bountiful opportunities exist for economic prosperity to be leveraged to attain the desired peacebuilding goals.

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